

What Role Did White Christian Nationalism Play in the Buffalo Massacre? - RELEVANT

by Tyler Huckabee May 17, 2022

9-12 minutes

In the wake of the horrific shooting in Buffalo, New York, that left ten people dead, the questions about what happened are difficult to ignore. The 18-year-old gunman Payton Gendron [wrote a lengthy manifesto](#) in which he espoused his belief in Replacement Theory — a racist ideology that holds White Americans like himself are being “replaced” by Black Americans. He wrote about his plans to attack Buffalo’s Tops grocery store, based on its predominantly Black clientele.

In the manifesto, Gendron said he was not a Christian, but does “believe in and practice many Christian values.” We reached out to Samuel Perry, Assistant Professor of Sociology and Religious Studies at the University of Oklahoma and co-author of several books on White Christian Nationalism including *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* and *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy*. He explained the distinctions and overlap between White Nationalism and Christian Nationalism, how violence has crept into the American Church and what we can do about it.

This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

RELEVANT: The gunman is being identified as a White Nationalist. Can you explain what overlap, if any, that has with Christian Nationalism?

SAMUEL PERRY: There actually are connections to White Christian Nationalism, as I’ll explain in a second. But what we’re mostly seeing this guy espousing is white supremacist ideology, and he’s very much so what people are calling Great Replacement Theory. This has been something that we’ve seen espoused by the far right for a long time.

People talk about Tucker Carlson, but I actually first read it in Ann Coulter back in early 2010. She wrote a book called *Adios America*. Basically, the whole thesis of the book was that the Democrats were using immigration to replace the average voter. The Democrats were done trying to persuade Americans who would not

buy into their leftist ideology, so what they wanted to do is bring in more immigrants who would just vote Democrat and replace “real Americans.” This is a long trope. You see this among Tucker Carlson but you also see it among people like Charlie Kirk. It’s this idea that you’re not only changing the average voter. You’re changing the culture.

Now the reason this is actually, I think, connected to Christian Nationalism in some powerful ways is that we can actually show in survey data that White Christian Nationalism is associated with all of these fears. Even in the shooter’s own words, he says he’s not a Christian, he says that he has not prayed for God’s forgiveness, he hasn’t confessed his sins and that kind of thing. But he does say “I do try to live out Christian values,” as he is about to go perpetrate this act of evil.

Later on in his manifesto, he talks about how Whiteness is both White genes and White culture. And then he describes what White culture is and he says that White culture is characterized by the Christian religion. He says the best culture — the culture that he wants to perpetuate is not only White genes — but it’s also White culture characterized by Christianity.

That actually gets us pretty close to White Christian Nationalism. It’s divorced from any kind of Jesus talk. It’s not about loving your neighbor and it’s not about sacrifice. It’s about culture and Christian values, whatever that means. And it’s connected to Whiteness and nationality and what we want to see in our society. So, without coming out and saying, “I’m a White Christian nationalist,” he’s giving all the indicators that these things we see, they go hand in hand together.

When the gunman wrote that he wasn’t a Christian, you could almost feel this collective sigh of relief from some Christian pundits and influencers. Like, “Whew, we’re off the hook for this one.”

Yeah. You want to absolve your own group from culpability here. And so do I think that this guy said, “Jesus wants me to go do this?” No. But I do think his understanding of Christianity — for some weird reason — was such that he could say, “I try to live out Christian values,” while he is espousing White supremacy, antisemitism and hate towards groups.

So we have to ask, what kind of exposure did this guy have to Christianity? What was his understanding of Christian values that he actually thought those two things were compatible? That he actually thought you could be a Christian living out “Christian values,” but you didn’t have to keep the Jesus part? Or you could keep the values part and apparently find some success doing that or that the kind of America that he wanted to see, the one characterized by White supremacy and in oppression of minority

groups and one that he was about to go kind of live out as he shot these people, was reflecting of the Christian religion?

I don't think this guy thought it was a spiritual thing that he did. But I think he does think it was a thing that was consistent with the Christian values that he saw. And I think that ought to be horrifying to us, frankly.

Where is the disconnect in Christianity that allows this sort of hatred and this sort of violence to slip in under the umbrella of Christianity?

Christian is not becoming synonymous with Republican, but it is synonymous with Conservative. When Christian becomes synonymous with political and cultural Conservatism, all things Conservative get baptized. Everything Conservative is Christian, everything Christian is Conservative, and nothing is Conservative enough.

So for some evangelicals, to say, "Hey guys, maybe we ought to go with the more progressive view on this issue," is like saying, "Hey guys, maybe we want to go with Satan on this issue."

When that happens, it's no longer about what Jesus wants. It's no longer even about what is Biblical. It just becomes about anybody on the Right is now on our side. Which is why you can have Christians retweeting people who say horrible and mean, bully-ish kind of things. It just becomes about winning culture wars at that point.

If you add a little bit of religion to that, it becomes even more dangerous. Paul Jewett, political scientist, has looked into this a good bit. When you combine Christian Nationalism with supernatural belief, it combines that sense of having something stolen with the idea that there is a cosmic battle between good and evil that you're a part of. If you lose, it's not just, "Hey, it's democracy. Sometimes you lose. Sometimes you win." It is a cosmic battle between Satan and God. And that justifies all kinds of violence.

So for Christian Nationalists, the stakes are just cosmically higher than they are for people with different political beliefs, and that justifies violence?

Frederick Douglass made the observation that on the plantation, the slave masters who were the religious ones were always the worst ones. He said, that's the worst thing you could do is get a religious slave master because they could justify their violence with anything, while quoting the Bible to you. And I think you can see that kind of tendency, that kind of appeal to Romans 13, that any authority that exists has been justified, has been sanctioned and put in place by God and so they do not wield the sword for nothing. So, I think that becomes a baptism of righteous violence.

I think more churches are recognizing that this is a problem, but don't really know what to do about it.

I say, don't go around calling people Christian Nationalists. Just like I'd say don't go around calling people fascists. Don't go around pointing fingers at people and saying you are a racist. I think we want to talk about these things in terms of ideas and ideologies that are toxic and bad and frankly un-biblical, un-Christian, un-American.

I think you could extend this to not just White Christian nationalism, but White supremacy authoritarianism, authoritarian populism that we're seeing just spout up all over the world, connect that to its consequences, which we are actually seeing and documenting. We can see the violence, we can see the oppression.

Where's that coming from? Well, if it's coming from this ideology, then let's talk about why this ideology is harmful and something that we need to rethink and reevaluate. We need to rethink our language. I'm thankful. I do think pastors around the country are waking up to this and saying, "You know what? We're not saying disengage from politics. We're not saying all conservatives are bad. We've never said Christians who want to influence the public square with their faith are bad. We're saying 'White Christian Nationalist ideology and all of the things associated with it are fundamentally bad. And we want to oppose those things.'"

So I'm thankful for every time I see a conservative seminary professor or Christian pastor say, "You know what? I'm not down with Christian Nationalism. That's a bad thing." I thank God for it. I want to amplify those voices. We need a broad set of coalitions. We need to unite shoulder to shoulder with people who disagree with us on a variety of issues. Secular Americans, Christian Americans, Tim Keller and David French and Beth Moore and Andrew Seidel — who is a lawyer from the Americans United for Separation of Church and State — Jemar Tisby is in there. Kristin Du Mez is in there. I'm in there too. We need to unite, to say, "This ideology is toxic, bad, anti-democratic, harmful. Let's get back to a healthier way of working together and actually solve some problems collectively."

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